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ABSTRACT

Indian students who have withdrawn from public schools for various reasons may receive alternative education at Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Boarding Schools, but they may also face academic, environmental, and personal problems. Attending a boarding school involves a radical culture break. Students are often far from home, deprived of parental guidance, family support, and cultural reinforcement. BIA schools have historically discouraged the use of the students' native tongue. Students are plunged into a strange, faster-paced environment with confining rules and regulations. Often there is little counseling and many students feel no one cares about them. Peer pressure can be intense. The curriculum itself can be a problem in that many students are one to three years behind in academic skills even though they are of average or more intelligence. This contributes to a high dropout rate. As a result students become dependent upon this strange new system, its rewards, and its objectives. They exhibit depression, anxiety, and poor self-concept, and tend to abuse alcohol. Indian students can help alleviate the problems inherent in boarding school life by making and communicating openly with close friends at the school. Schools can help by aiding the transition to boarding school life. (SB)

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THEME: SCHOOLS BELONG TO THE PEOPLE

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TO IMPROVING INDIAN EDUCATION

## *INDIAN STUDENTS' PROBLEMS IN BOARDING SCHOOLS*

*by*

*Ruth V. Klinekole*

The Bureau of Indian Affairs feels that education is very important among the American Indian society. The Indian people are granted the privilege to attend any school system, whether it be public or private, without charge. The public schools are oriented toward the middle-class white American society. Therefore, the Indian child has difficulty in adjusting properly to the public school environment. The inability of such adjustment causes embarrassment for the Indian student, eventually leading to dropping out from the public school system. Serving as alternatives, B.I.A. Boarding Schools have contributed greatly to the educational well-being of Indian students who have withdrawn from a public school. In combination with learning the basic skills of general education, the students are taught the cultural backgrounds and customs of the many different Indian tribes. Attending such schools helps the Indian students to broaden their knowledge of other cultures, leading to the appreciation of their own tribal ways. But for the personal well-being of each student, many problems become apparent in the Boarding School environment. Many Indian students attend these schools in hopes that their social and emotional problems will be solved. The students are responsible to attend classes daily, but they are left independent to make their own personal decisions. The Indian students in Boarding Schools have to adjust to living away from the security of a family and away from parental guidance. Therefore, the Boarding School student has difficult decisions and adjustments to make, plus a tremendous amount of problems to face.

The Indian student attending a Boarding School feels that he is not given equal right as received at home on the reservation where the parents allow their child the complete freedom to hike in the mountains, swim in the nearby river, walk in the open forest, etc. Whatever the home environment, the child was allowed to go out and learn of nature through seeing and experiencing. With new rules and regulations, the student feels confined and unable to live as he is accustomed to. Early government practice was to remove the child as far as possible from his home environment. The regimentation of Boarding School life worked against the initiative and independence that were a vital part of the Native American's way of life.[1]

In 1976, eighteen Boarding Schools were surveyed and they provided data in response to the specific items. Of the eighteen, twelve at secondary level reported abuse of alcohol as a major problem affecting both school attendance and dormitory discipline. Some schools reported having alcohol education programs and specialized alcohol counselors. Drug usage reported by most schools reflect a decrease in hard drug usage and an increase in marijuana.[2] The special programs

[1]William G. Demmert, Jr., "Indian Education: Where and Whither?" *Education Digest*, Dec. 1976, pp. 41-44.

and counselors, concerned with alcohol and drug abuse, help the students to realize the bad effects of using drugs and alcohol resulting in unfinished or tardy school work and poor health conditions. The counselors appear to be trying very hard to reach as many students as they can with this information.

Aside from drug and alcohol prohibitions placed on the students, they are required to abide by dormitory rules. As Sister Peter Claver states, "In the case of our school, few students have found it too strict—either in the academic demands made on them, or, as regards the dorm regulations which have to be made and enforced for the good of individuals and for the common good."[3]

The Boarding School administration needs to assist the students to adjust comfortably to the form of living of today. The pastoral world of the Indian as the fast juggernaut world of the white man caused a shattering impact to the Indian. From the crumpled and torn remnant, the Indian looked out on a puzzling new kind of life with patterns more diverse than those of all the Indian nations. Add this to the Indian's longing to retain his identity, and the education problem so complex that it is hard to figure out what "meeting the special education needs" of the Indian student means. B.I.A. schools that serve Indian students are just beginning to recognize this fact and to become sensitive to these needs, and to deal with them.[4] Recently, boarding schools have relaxed visitation rules and have permitted students to visit home sometimes every week. As recently as 1969, such frequent visits to homes were discouraged or forbidden in many boarding schools because it was feared that the students would not come back.[5]

The nature of the boarding schools' organizational structure throughout is remarkably similar. Autonomy at the area and school level did not breed variety, but a similarity. Goals were seldom stated but were obvious and evident as in any colonialist system. In one study, one set of goals seen by staff appeared to be to socialize the Native child to "American" society. The students meanwhile saw preparation for post-high school education as the main function of the school but seen as highly unrealistic by the staff.[6]

Today the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools exist for the expressed purpose of providing extraordinary education for those who, for various reasons, do not enter into the channels of public edu-

[2]Dr. George W. Underwood, "Off Reservation Boarding School Survey, Student Profile," *Research and Evaluation Report Series No. 56*, Albuquerque, New Mexico: Office of Indian Education Programs, 1976), pp. 5-6.

[3]Information in a letter to the author from Sister Peter Claver of the St. Catherine Indian School, 21, November 1978.

[4]Demmert, Jr., p. 42.

[5]Patrick D. Lynch, "Professionals and Clients: Goal Dissonance in Native-American Schools," in *Chicanos and Native Americans* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 184+

[6]*Systems Analysis of Indian Education in B.I.A. Schools* (Abt Associates, Inc., 55 Wheeler St., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969), pp. 46-52.

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cation. It is this group which requires special services of schools designed to meet their specialized needs.[7] It is a fact that all the students in off-reservation residential schools are extraordinary and unique in their needs. Their needs are directly related to economic, social, psychological, and educational conditions of the families and the students.

A number of Indian students are placed in the boarding school environment for a variety of social and emotional reasons. They are referred by educational and social agencies from the reservation community in order to benefit from specialized education programs and counseling services aimed at keeping the student in school. However, high drop out rates are observed in many of the boarding schools.[9]

Boarding schools in many instances are considered the most favorable, or the only alternative by child welfare agencies and courts for students who cannot, for a variety of reasons, remain at home and attend a public school.[10] Many students who attend boarding schools come with a history of living in high stress situations. From families where there has been long term unemployment, broken homes, death in the family, alcoholic parents, from both urban and rural areas, history of neurotic or psychotic disorders, alcohol or other drug problems, expulsion from several schools for various reasons, and juvenile delinquency. Some students are sent to boarding schools as an alternative to confinement while others are released from confinement on the condition they go to school.[11]

It is apparent a different kind of student is now entering the residential school. Characteristically, the residential school has served, in the past, students from remote and isolated areas who had no other choice but to attend a B.I.A. boarding school. That type of student is giving way to the student who has tried public school and for some reason or another preferred to attend a boarding school.[12]

The Off-Reservation Residential School Committee conducted a survey which included fifteen different boarding schools. The table which is illustrated on the following page lists the different boarding schools involved in the survey. This list of boarding schools pertains to any other table which will be illustrated also throughout the report.

[7]Underwood, p. 5.

[8]Off-Reservation Residential School Committee, *Technical Information for the Committee* (Anadarko, Oklahoma: Indian Education Programs, 1978), p. X.

[9]T. Brent Price, Max L. Baty, and Paul A. Nutting, "An Intervention Process Designed to Recognize and Prevent School Dropouts in an American Indian Boarding School," *B.I.A. Education Research Bulletin*, Vol. 5: No. 3 (Sept. 1977), p. 15.

[10]Underwood, p. 6.

[11]Division of Student Life, "Counseling/Education Program—A New Approach." *It Is A Time Of Visions*, Book 5: pp. 7-8.

[12]Committee on Off-Reservation Residential Schools, *Off Reservation Residential Schools Operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs* (Washington, D.C., BIA, 15 Sept. 1978), p. 3.

Table A specifically names the boarding schools which were chosen to gather information on different areas of problems which occur from these schools. This table indicates the enrollment status for the school year 1977-78.[13]

Table A

Off-Reservation Residential Schools Included in the Survey

| Schools | Number of Students |
|---|---|
| Chemawa | 330 |
| Chilocco | 147 |
| Mt. Edgecumbe | 443 |
| Sequoyah | 284 |
| Ft. Sill | 210 |
| Riverside | 266 |
| Seneca Elementary | 144 |
| Whapeton Elementary | 360 |
| Flandreau | 727 |
| Wingate Elementary | 628 |
| Wingate High | 897 |
| Stewart Indian | 511 |
| Phoenix Indian | 841 |
| Sherman Indian High | 777 |
| Intermountain | 1056 |
| N=7621 | |

Table B is an interpretation of the information provided on the Application to Boarding Schools, which was a major source of information in the survey which was conducted.[14] It is interesting to note that the "Need for Structured Environment" which concerns family-social problems, and the very large "Educational Reasons" play a key role in the persuasion of the students applying to boarding schools.

Szasz's review of early boarding school programs contends that the students who applied to boarding schools for various "Educational Reasons" realized, after they received their educational training, that the schools had not fully prepared them for the future. A great many of the students who attended Bureau boarding schools returned to their reservations, where they were unable to apply the training they had received. Course work in these schools was usually unrelated to the environment and culture from which the student came; on the other

[13]Off-Reservation Residential School Committee, pp. 48-49.

[14]Ibid., pp. 60-61.

Table B

Reasons for Attending Off-Reservation Residential Schools According to Student's Application

| Reasons | Number of Students |
|---|---|
| Need for Structured Environment | 1854 |
| Economic—Poverty | 913 |
| Alcoholism in Home | 160 |
| Alcoholism of Student | 53 |
| Education Reasons | 4162 |
| Special Behavioral Problems of Student | 320 |
| Correctional | 47 |
| Court Case | 73 |
| Unable to Adjust to Public Schools | 518 |
| N=7536 | |

hand, vocational training was not sufficiently advanced to enable the student to find an urban job.[15] Therefore, the education received was considered to be lower than that received at a public school.

In addition to the boarding school student receiving a less than adequate education, they were often confronted with the idea that they were attending the school as a free person with no problems or difficulties. Serving as a peer counselor at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Loren Gaseoma states, "Most students need personal attention, a listener, a sounding board, to allow them to release emotions and reflect back on what they are feeling."[16] Some of the boarding schools do not have these special counseling services. The students need to know that someone cares. Clare LaRose expresses her opinion toward the counseling services needed for the boarding school students. "If students knew someone cared, and were willing to trust people, they would find out more about themselves. So much energy is being used up in hostile, negative attitudes, and self-protection, that individuals don't take advantage of the opportunity to learn about themselves, or set positive directions."[17] The boarding schools who do employ counselors need to become more aware of these facts and take positive actions for the good of the student.

However, the counselors do not only have to think about the mental status of the students. Many curriculum offerings may add or even serve as obstacles toward the well-being of a student. Other factors

[15]Margaret Szasz, *Education and the American Indian* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), p. 2.

[16]Division of Student Life, "Reaching Out, Peer Counselor Program," *It Is A Time Of Visions*, Book 2: p. 10.

[17]Ibid., p. 34.

which contribute greatly to the problems faced by the students are numerous. Past history of boarding schools, as pointed out by Szasz, were notoriously inadequate. Earlier boarding schools showed evidence of overcrowding, insufficient food, and improper treatment of sick children that led to frequent epidemics. Also in earlier years, congressional appropriations were meager. Boarding school pupils, including a significant percentage of preadolescent children, were forced to provide almost all essentials by working long hours in the shops, the gardens, and the kitchens. In addition, they were subjected to harsh discipline according to the arbitrary will of the school superintendents.[18] Obviously, these kinds of inadequacies have been overcome by the Bureau but many problems still persist.

In terms of intellectual capability, the current secondary boarding schools recently reported in survey conducted by the Bureau, that entering students have average or above intellectual ability, but range from one to three years behind the level of basic involved in language and mathematics. One school reported seventy percent of its students entering the ninth grade are at, or below, the fifth grade level in basic skill achievement.[19] For the students to have low academic standings, it causes them to learn slower and decreases their interest to receive a sufficient education. By receiving a lower education, the drop out rate from the boarding schools steadily increases. From the late 1960's to the early 1970's, the average educational level for all Indians was 8.4 years. Because the parental participation was minimal in their children's education, the average drop out rate in grades eight to twelve from the boarding schools was from thirty-nine to forty-eight percent.[20] A large drop out rate is still being reported from various boarding schools. In the 1976-77 school year, Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute students left school before completing their courses as follows: 38% left school because of violating the attendance rules, 24% withdrew for personal reasons and 9% left for other reasons. Approximately 29% either obtained employment or completed a course sequence during the year.[21]

Another reason contributing to the drop out rates is the student's peer pressure. Some of the students are greatly influenced by peer pressure, especially since the Indian students are in a majority. Some do not make full use of their potential because excelling sometimes brings them into disfavor with their peers. Their classmates have been known, on occasion, to ridicule them or to make it difficult for them in other ways.[22] The Indian students may be reluctant to com-

[18]Margaret Szasz, *Education and the American Indian* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), p. 2.

[19]Underwood, p. 7.

[20]Demmert, Jr., p. 43.

[21]Off-Reservation Residential School Committee, p. 11.

[22]Information in a letter to the author from Sister Peter Claver of the St. Catherine Indian School, 21 November 1978.

pete with one another or to have attention drawn to themselves when they are singled out for praise. Such attention, produces not pride but acute embarrassment. Children may be reduced to withdrawal from the school situation entirely if reward, as well as punishment, becomes too persistent.[23]

Such persistency of peer pressure may also prevent the Indian student to share his cultural background with his immediate peer group. An organizational feature or the boarding school is the isolation of the institution from the client's culture. A radical culture break is demanded of the child entering into the boarding school for the first time. The difficulty of access by parents to the school, the historic antipathy of the BIA schools to children's using their tribal language, the remoteness of location from the child's home, and the immersion of the child into a strange new "total environment" called for a break with the past not unlike that involved with a prison or a mental institution. The child divorced from his culture was forced to become totally dependent upon the system, its rewards, and its objectives. A student entered a closed system and had to surrender completely to its ways or get out. Leon states that separation of children five to eight years old can produce serious effects and that there is no doubt such children are unhappy in boarding schools.[24] Students of Phoenix Indian School have complained that the curriculum and classroom work "have no relationship to Indian history or to Indian culture."[25]

Without the opportunity to learn the different Indian cultures, the students may become upset or lonely. A clinical psychologist interviewed in a boarding school in the Southwest presented a picture of prevailing symptoms of Indian youth. Among young people aged 12 to twenty years whom he has dealt with in a number of settings has found depression, anxiety, poor self-concept and alcohol abuse to be the main emotional problems. He described the depression as a combination of mild loneliness, boredom, internalized anxiety and anger.[26] Criticism of the Bureau schools continues as Alfonso Ortiz, a Pueblo Indian, writes, "Indian boarding schools are notorious for providing inadequate education and other researchers who have studied Indian schools have found a high incidence of mental illnesses, suppression of natural ability and low achievement among the students."[27]

Together with these emotional situations, the students feel confined and unable to build up self-confidence. Olivia Pease, student at the Institute of American Indian Arts, stated, "We are not animals and we

[23]Frances E. Svensson, "What About the First Americans?" *Today's Education*, Jan. 1973, p. 39-40+

[24]Robert L. Leon, "Mental Health Considerations in the Indian Boarding School Program." As reported in Special Subcommittee on Indian Education, *Indian Education*, Part 5 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 2205.

[25]"Students Charged: Misconduct." *Wassaja*, 3:11 (Nov.-Dec. 1975), p. 5.

[26]Off-Reservation Residential School Committee, p. 9.

[27]Alfonso Ortiz, "Native Education Under Fire," *The American Indian Reader: Education* (Indian Historian Press, 1973), p. 82.

are not in the army. Why must the school be run as a military installation?"[28]

As early as 1928, the Meriam study expressed concern with this statement: "Perhaps the sorest point in Indian Education is represented by the Federal Boarding Schools... where Indian children have the lowest self-concept of any identifiable group in the country."[29] The study went on to say that the low feeling of their personal well-being caused the boarding school students to decrease in their participation in the classrooms. Because of this decrease, a vast majority of the Indian children attending boarding schools were labeled by their teachers as misfits, underachievers, or troublemakers; and attitudes of school personnel insured that they would never be considered otherwise while in school.[30]

While teachers labeled their Indian students in boarding schools in earlier years, the students of today still experience difficult decisions and adjustments to make. They still find themselves in positions with tremendous amount of problems that are extremely overwhelming. No one is ever free from problems, and the Indian child attending a boarding school has to be able to accept this fact. One solution which may help a little is to communicate openly with close friends as to get the inner feelings out in the open. Communicating with friends helps the Indian child to possess more friends and feel comfortable. Having friends and knowing that people around really care, well, what else can an Indian student ask for at boarding schools? Aside from the problems and social situations which often occur at any boarding school, just the thought that friends are present with a helping hand will help the Indian child in some form. It takes self-determination and openness toward the fellow Indian being.

[28]"Indian Art Institute Troubles," *Wassaja*, 3:1 (Jan.-Feb. 1975), p. 23.

[29]L. Merian, *Problems of Indian Administration*, Institute for Government Research. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1928.

[30]Ibid., p. 8.

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